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The Near-Death Experience and the Question of Immortality: A Philosophical Approach

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Abstract

From tentative beginnings the literature on near-death experiences has mushroomed beyond all computation. In the nature of the case, the bulk of this literature depends very much on anecdotal evidence and presupposes that those who claim to have experienced such phenomena are telling their stories in good faith. Despite a minority of dissenting voices, most of the doctors, psychologists and neuroscientists working in this field of study at least entertain the possibility that the stories related by their patients or subjects, whether spontaneously or formally, may serve as evidence for some kind of afterlife. The debate over whether or not this is a valid approach has been well rehearsed during the past thirty years, and although it would be tempting to add to it here, there is a more fundamental question to consider which, while having been aired in the field of philosophy, seems to have escaped notice among participants of the present debate. The question is whether any form of afterlife would be truly desirable. And would a state of immortality be any more purposive than oblivion? Following some preliminary discussion, this will be the burden of our song.

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1. Life without Death

Why do populist books on near-death experiences (NDEs) sell like hot cakes? The obvious answer is that most of us value our consciousness, regard death as the ultimate threat, and so welcome any possible evidence that our personal consciousness might persist beyond death. Of course, even if it were to do so, it would not of itself guarantee our immortality. The question of whether or not our egos persist forever is a separate issue entirely. That we are so eager to believe is evident from the fact that sensationalist accounts of NDEs by people with little knowledge of the natural sciences are readily set alongside materialist explanations by qualified scientists of various kinds (Bailey & Yates 1996). Authors writing from the 'believer's' perspective tend to make reference to the usual suspects – Greyson (2021), Moody (1975, 2010), Osis & Haraldsson (1990), Ring (1980) Sabom (1982) and van Lommel (2010), for instance – while avoiding entirely any reference to Susan Blackmore's seminal work, *Beyond the Body* (1982) or to her subsequent *Dying to Live*

(1993). One of the few contributors to the Bailey and Yates volume to take a more even-handed approach is physician Melvin Morse (1996: 299–318), and more attempts to 'bridge the gulf' would be welcome.

Perhaps the strangest contribution is that of Mellen-Thomas Benedict (1996: 39–52) whose personal account of his NDE embodies the creativity of an artist – which is precisely what he was at the time of his experience. Here is the final paragraph:

> *After dying and coming back, I really respect life and death. In our DNA experiments we may have opened a door to a great secret. Soon we will be able to live as long as we want to live in this body. After living 150 years or so, there will be an intuitive soul sense that you will want to change channels. Living forever in one body is not as creative as reincarnation, as transferring energy in this fantastic vortex of energy that we are in. We are actually going to see the wisdom of life and death and enjoy it. As it is now, we have already been alive forever. This body that you are in has been alive forever. It comes from an unending stream of life, going back to the Big Bang and beyond. This body gives life to the next life, in dense and subtle energy. This body has been alive forever already. (1996: 51).*

Admittedly, the apparently delusional nature of this statement is an extreme example of a personal NDE account, but it is not alone. Other contributors to the Bailey and Yates 'reader', including Betty Eadie (1996: 53–60) and George Ritchie (1996: 87–99), are equally effusive, if a little less creative. Both these individuals have produced books on their experiences (Eadie 1992; and Ritchie 1991). The extent of their accuracy, however, is questionable. NDEs typically last a few minutes, during which the amount of information that the apparently dying brain is able to process must be limited, and surely not equivalent to a book full. The most valuable NDEs for researchers are those that are related by the subject as soon as possible following his/ her experience. Books, often written many years *ex eventu*, are the vehicles of reflection, much of which is likely to derive from the imagination, since memory has been shown to deteriorate with time (Schacter 1996, 2021), even in the relatively short term (Wagenaar 1986).

Another NDEr who shares with Benedict the view that we have been in existence since the moment of creation is Betty Eadie. Like many other NDErs, she presupposes that the figure of light she encountered during her experience was a specific holy figure – in her case Jesus Christ.

> *There was no questioning who he was. I knew that he was my Savior [sic], and friend, and God. He was Jesus Christ, who has always loved me, even when I thought he hated me. He was life itself, love itself … I knew that I had known him from the beginning, from long before my earth life, because my spirit* ***remembered*** *him. (1996: 56)*

From this short extract, a whole phalanx of questions arises. How did Eadie know that she was in the presence of Jesus? Normally we recognise people we know by their facial features, their voice and their mannerisms, but she had never met Jesus in the flesh. The philosopher Antony Flew (2005: 133–34) plausibly suggested that believers habitually identify religious figures in accordance with their perceptions: '[T] he expert natural historian of religious experience would be

altogether astounded to hear of the vision of Bernadette Soubirois [sic] occurring not to a Roman Catholic at Lourdes, but to an Hindu in Benares…'. Eadie's identification was based not on present knowledge but on prior belief.

Again, her identifying Jesus with God is based purely on traditional Christian dogma. This 'truth' is largely absent from the earliest New Testament literature, and while there are hints of such a doctrine in John's Gospel (1: 1–14; 8: 58; 14: 6; 20: 28), it is generally recognised that this work is the product of reflection on decades of doctrinal development in the church which eventually formed the basis of the great Christological debates of the next few centuries. It is highly doubtful that the historical Jesus (whatever that means) believed himself to be God incarnate (Ehrman 2014, for instance). Yet the reaction to any challenge to this dogma can be quite extreme. The inflammatory volume compiled by a group of seven theologians in the 1970s, entitled *The Myth of God Incarnate* (ed. John Hick, 1977), caused a furore, inducing knee-jerk comments from evangelical Christians in the tabloids and journals, including headlines such as 'Seven against Christ'.

Edie's description of 'Jesus' as 'life itself, love itself' can only be an expression of her emotive state at the time of her experience. It is no doubt true that the impact of the NDE in many cases is beyond words, an observation which must apply typically to the 'felt' experience. Edie's phrase must be understood in that context, because otherwise it is so ephemeral as to be meaningless. It represents a faltering attempt to convey feelings which are simply beyond verbal expression – a procedure which is tantamount to trying to describe the colour red without reverting to examples of red objects.

This mind-boggling perception that death is a delusion, and that there has never been a time when we were not in some form of existence, is a feature presented by a relative minority of NDErs which, for obvious reasons, is completely lacking in any justifiable foundation. It is necessarily a subjective perception, and thus unverifiable. However, they do share with other NDErs many of the more common NDE features. I need not particularise – detachment from the body, the tunnel, the light, the life review, and so forth – since this has been done in numerous publications (Bailey & Yates 1996: 5–6; Moody 1975: 19–84; Ring 1980: 39–66; van Lommel 2010: 17–41) and, of course, no two cases are identical, the features noted differing greatly from one case to the next, which surely suggests a degree of subjectivity. One feature which often seems to escape notice, however, is that of spiritual knowledge which, so it is claimed, cuts far more deeply than earthly knowledge acquired through the normal cerebral processes. NDE knowledge, it appears, is derived supernaturally. But what does this knowledge really amount to? Here is how Betty Eadie describes her heavenly learning experience at the hands of the 'master teacher':

> *My comprehension was such that I could understand volumes in an instant. It was as if I could look at a book and comprehend it at a glance – as if I could just sit back while the book revealed itself to me in every detail, forward and backward, inside out, every nuance and possible suggestion. All in an instant. … The word 'omniscient' had never been more meaningful to me. Knowledge permeated me. In a sense it became me, and I was amazed at my ability to comprehend the mysteries of the universe simply by reflecting on them. (Eadie 1996: 57).*

However, when she provides an example by reflecting on the question of why there are so many churches (by which she means religions and denominations), the answer she provides sounds suspiciously human: Each religion provides

incomplete spiritual knowledge in itself, but may be a stepping-stone to other faiths which in turn provide further knowledge. Each step taken moves the believer to a higher level. Presumably, in giving this answer, Eadie is implying that her NDE had provided a short-cut to omniscience. It should be noted that Eadie was 'persuaded' to publish an account of her NDE experience (1992) some twenty years after it occurred and that, with the best will in the world, accounts of this kind are based primarily on re-created memories rather than on what was experienced at the time.

Mellen-Thomas Benedict's account (1996: 41–51) follows Eadie in his pursuit of omniscience and claims that science will one day discover the God particle:

> *Soon our science will quantify spirit. We are coming up with devices now that are sensitive to subtle energy or spirit energy. Physicists use these atomic colliders to smash atoms to see what they are made of. They have got it down to quarks and charm and all that. Well, one day they are going to come down to the little thing that holds it all together, and they are going to have to call that … God …. We are just beginning to understand that we are creating too, as we go along. As I saw forever [in my NDE], I came to a realm in which there is a point where we pass all knowledge and begin creating the next fractal, the next level. We have that power to create as we explore. And that is God expanding itself through us. (Benedict 1996: 49).*

We are told that this is not simply talk, and that, despite his having no specialist training in the relevant areas, he has convinced several academics that he has developed viable techniques for the treatment of diseases which were unknown to medical science before he acquired the necessary knowledge during his NDE experience. As far as I am aware, these claims are purely anecdotal and have not been formerly verified in any learned article.

The descriptions of Benedict and Edie are really particular instances of what may generally be termed transcendentalism – the view that consciousness is not located exclusively in the individual brain, but exists as a kind of pre-existent commodity and is to be regarded as universally basic. Many have resorted to pseudo-scientific solutions which, in all probability, are less likely to be correct than those offered by the recognised natural or human sciences such as biology, chemistry, neurophysiology and psychology. During the last forty years the market has been flooded with books bearing trendy-sounding labels such as 'nonlocality consciousness' (Dossey 1989), 'holographic theory of consciousness' (Talbot 1991), 'theory of essence' (Arnette 1992), 'self-aware universe' (Goswami 1993), and 'holonomic theory of consciousness' (Wade 1996).

It goes without saying that there are as many disagreements among transcendentalist writers as there are among traditional scientists over one theory or another. But what do they agree about with regard to the mystery of consciousness?

- First, that consciousness itself is primary and the 'ground of all being'. Goswami (1993: 1), for example, states: 'All events are phenomena in consciousness. Beyond what we see as immanent reality [i.e. the here and now] there is a transcendent reality. The division of reality into transcendent and immanent is an epiphenomenon of experience'. This is a bold statement to make on the first page of a book and sounds like a manifesto. Everything hangs on Goswami's

ability to support his case which, given the nature of the proposition, will be extremely difficult.

- Second, consciousness is non-locative; it is a universal property and does not 'belong' to the individual. It is not something we acquire at birth and relinquish at death. The idea of each person having an individual mind is an illusion (Dossey 1989: 98). One wonders, however, where the real illusion lies. As it stands, the transcendentalist's assertion has no independent attestation. It seems vain to suggest that a similar experience which occurs as an element of someone's NDE or OBE is not attributable – or wholly attributable – to the brain simply because it occurred under extraordinary conditions.
- Consciousness can, and sometimes does, function independently of the brain. 'This is a key*assumption*, especially for understanding how the blind may be aware of something that seems like visual perception' (Williams 2019; for an alternative view, see Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, 2016: 46–59). 'If the mind is nonlocal … the possibility of survival of bodily death is opened' (Dossey 1989: 7). This, of course, is the crux for most transcendentalists. But what form would this survival take? Dossey seems to intimate that it would be the survival of the ego. But isn't this the very argument that most transcendentalists are keen to avoid? Isn't the concept of the individual mind supposed to be an illusion?

Williams (2019) attempts to blind us with esoteric jargon that*sounds* erudite but seems entirely devoid of evidential value:

> *[W]hat we have here is an adumbration of a process that begins with Mind fully independent of brain becoming self-referential, that is, becoming identified with consciousness itself, and then converting this noumenal consciousness into a dualistic modality that generates the familiar phenomenal world. What we have called transcendental awareness is at least the beginning of the reversal of that process by which, even though the traces of everyday dualism remain, the individual is enabled, however temporarily, to experience the world from a perspective independent of brain functioning and the operation of the senses.*

Although Williams here outlines a possible alternative to the traditional narrative suggested by the natural sciences, his proposal seems to be a hunch based on apparent anomalies, and is devoid of any attempt to provide a sound scientific and philosophical basis for his hypothesis. Williams says we need a new kind of science – a new paradigm – but perhaps this is simply to save him the trouble of the meticulous research carried out by regular scientists, often accompanied by slow, incremental progress and periodic reversals. Perhaps the old adage is true: there is no gain without pain.

2. Knowledge and Language

i. Knowledge

It is obvious that most NDErs find their experiences so overwhelming that they are left in no doubt as to their authenticity. They truly believe that, if an OBE was part of their experience, their egos separated from their bodies, observing them from a point external to them, or that they really were transported to a heavenly sphere where they met deceased relatives or a holy figure, the alleged identity of which usually accords with their cultural conditioning. Generally-speaking, the

sincerity of these accounts need not be doubted. However, this is not the same as affirming that what the percipients believed to be the case was indeed so. After all, our brain activity during sleep is capable of producing some exceedingly vivid images, but we have no difficulty in separating fact from fantasy, especially given that some of our dreams are so bizarre. The NDEr tells us that his or her experiences are completely different from the ordinary dream, but often finds difficulty in explaining why, except, perhaps, in terms of vividness and the claim that each detail is indelibly etched on the memory, making a lasting impression. Still, this is nowhere near enough for us to ascribe a supernatural cause to the experience.

At this juncture, we need to consider what epistemologists mean by 'knowledge'. In this regard, many NDErs would be classed as naïve realists (Ayer 1990: 79, 81–82, 113–18; Cardinal, Hayward & Jones 2004: 88–98; Dancy 1985: 147–55) in the sense that they claim their NDEs correspond with a reality external to themselves: X really *did* meet and speak with uncle Joe in a heavenly world! 'I left this world and I came back again', said one NDEr emphatically during a recorded interview. Philosophically, however, statements of this kind cannot be counted as representing true knowledge, even if it should turn out to be so. The question of how we can know what we think we know has always been a hotly-debated one (compare Descartes' rationalism, Hume's empiricism and Berkeley's idealism, for example [Landesman 1997; Cardinal, Hayward & Jones 2004]). The literature is out there in reams and, of course, it would be impracticable to apply even a smidgeon of it to the present case. One of the standard definitions of knowledge, however, is given as 'justified true belief' (JTB), and although this definition is not foolproof (Gettier 1967), it does at least provide an indication of what conditions must be met if a particular claim to knowledge is to be verified as such. Let us, therefore, apply the JTB approach to the claims of NDErs in order to ascertain to what extent these can be regarded as genuine knowledge.

The concept of JTB is generally presented in the following form:

- p is true
- S believes that p
- S is adequately justified in believing that p.

In this formula, 'p' stands for a particular proposition, while 'S' represents the person making the proposition. Everitt & Fisher (1995: 14) point out that the symbol 'S' does not merely designate the name of the person, but also his or her relationship to the proposition. Thus, we may exemplify as follows:

- It is true that Elgar wrote the *Enigma Variations* (p)
- Jane believes that Elgar wrote the *Enigma Variations* (S)
- Jane has sufficient evidence for her belief that Elgar wrote the *Enigma Variations.*

What would count as evidence in this case? First, the music is widely-known and has been heard by millions of people down the years. It has always appeared in concert programmes under that title as the work of Elgar, and is always announced as such each time it is aired on radio or television. Moreover, there are dozens of recordings of the work, all of which state the name of the composer and often carry his photograph. Finally, Elgar's original manuscript has been preserved. Any specialist calligrapher could verify Elgar's hand by comparing it with the manuscripts of other pieces

known to have been written by him. In this case, therefore, it can be affirmed that the truth of the above proposition is beyond reasonable doubt, and that Jane's belief can be classed as knowledge.

Philosophy being what it is, epistemologists have contrived to flick all sorts of flies into the ointment, but for present purposes the basic formula is all we need to apply to the singular experiences of NDErs. Let us now apply the same formula to an instance of these. The circumstances surrounding Jim's experience is comparatively common among the NDE fraternity. Jim has suffered a cardiac arrest and claims that, during his (happily successful) resuscitation he experienced the weird sensation of looking down on his own body. So:

- During resuscitation, Jim experienced looking down on his own body from a corner of the ceiling.
- His claim is that his experience was literally true.
- He claims to have had sufficient evidence to justify his belief.

Is there anything here that would convince us that that Jim is in possession of indubitable knowledge concerning his experience during resuscitation? The chief sticking-point relates to the singular nature of the experience. The proposed evidence in the case of the Elgar example was open to public scrutiny, but in Jim's case the outsider only has access to his prone, unconscious body, and doctors will be cognisant of the reduced oxygen supply to the brain which may cause it to behave in unpredictable ways. For Jim's own account we are reliant solely on the accuracy and integrity of his description. How is it possible to *know* that Jim's ego truly detached from his body?

The chief counter-thrust to the alleged realism of Jim's claim is that the overwhelming majority of people never have an out-of-body experience (OBE), suggesting that our sense of selfhood is inextricably bound with the physical body, and especially with the brain. Of course, we all have dreams, and occasionally we may dream that we are floating or disembodied, but there is no good reason to believe that this is really the case. Most neuropsychologists ascribe such sensations to the operation of the brain under REM conditions.

Many years ago, the psychologists Russell Noyes and Roy Kletti (1976; 1977a; 1977b) produced a series of studies detailing the occurrence of the spontaneous OBE phenomenon that resulted from cases of sudden trauma caused by road accidents and falls by climbers who lived to tell the tale. The brief feelings of dissociation to which these people testified undoubtedly occurred, but the consensus among psychologists is that they were caused by the physical brain's reaction to the prospect of sudden extinction. Certainly, this explanation is far more plausible than the view that the ego literally left the body for a few moments.

So far, we have established that OBEs, whether part of an NDE or not, are not simply imaginary or make-believe: they do occur. What has not been established, however, is any evidence that the ego genuinely exits the physical body at such times. Anecdotal evidence in such cases is nowhere near sufficient to constitute a claim to true knowledge. This deficiency has (perhaps with hindsight) been addressed by some NDErs who claim to have gained knowledge of events beyond their ken by observing them while outside their bodies (Ring 1980: 50–51; Sabom 1982: 44–47; van Lommel 2010: 20–21) – for example, offering accurate descriptions of the roles of various members of the resuscitation team which could only have been based on direct observation. One NDEr claimed to have floated around the hospital and

noticed a blue plimsol sitting outside on a third-floor window ledge. Supposedly, when her claim was checked, it was found to be true (Clark 1984: 242–55; Blackmore 1993: 127–28). Tellingly, there are no means of verifying this account. It is probable that in some cases, at least, such reports have been consciously embellished in order to make them sound more convincing (although I am not suggesting that this applies generally).

In the same vein, Charles Tart (1968) conducted an experiment in his sleep laboratory involving the services of a woman who claimed the ability to induce OBEs on a regular basis. For five nights running, after she had retired to bed, Tart entered the laboratory and placed a card, on which was written a five-digit number, on a high shelf which could not be accessed by the subject as long as she was in a prone position. The woman was then required to induce an OBE by means of which she could read the number on the card. For four nights, despite allegedly having had several OBEs, her attempts proved unsuccessful, but on the final occasion she did report the correct number. Tart suggested that the chances of her doing this purely by guesswork would have been 1/100,000. However, he was less forthcoming about the fact that he had placed the card on a shelf adjacent to a wall-clock whose face could have reflected the number in such a way as to be seen by the subject from her prone position. Moreover, Tart, who was supposed to be observing what took place from a window in his office, admitted to having dozed off for a few minutes, in which case the subject could have taken the opportunity to stand on the bed and read the card. Susan Blackmore (1986: 176) suggests that this is precisely what happened. So much for scientific precision.

The upshot of all this is that none of these claims to prove the veracity of particular OBEs are foolproof, and none would be sufficient to satisfy the JTB conditions demanded by epistemologists. Of course, this is not to say that the experiences themselves are not real to those who have them, nor that they do not have an underlying cause. While there can be no proof that this cause currently meets the stringent demands of the JTB criteria, there may be grounds for believing that it may do so in due course. Work done in recent times by neuroscientists such as Michael Persinger (1983: 1255–62; 2001: 515–24; see also Murphy 2015: 99–120) may tentatively suggest a link between various aspects of the NDE and specific brain centres, especially the temporal lobe. Were a decisive cause to be established that would explain particular effects of the NDE, we might be close to presenting data sufficiently robust to satisfy the JTB criteria. However, that point has not yet been reached. The problem for the religious believer is that if the various NDE features are regarded as evidence for God's promised afterlife, there can never be a point at which this proposition can be truly known, since God appears to be a concept rather than a being whose existence can be proved and hence known in the epistemological sense.

In the final analysis, the question of whether or not a specific OBE can meet the standard JTB criteria depends on the nature of the proposition. If we resist the temptation to prove too much, it may come close to being logically coherent. For example, if a proposition, 'p', is that a subject,'S', experiences a sensation of being out of the body (a), and that she believes the truth of this proposition (b), then she is justified in believing it (c), since she is not attempting to specify the precise nature of what is being proposed. This conclusion may seem trivial, but it is no more than what the conditions allow. What can be known, therefore, is what can be directly experienced during a specific OBE, but not the underlying cause.

ii. Language

Another technique for presenting NDE's as life-affirming experiences is the use of esoteric language as exemplified in Bailey's essay, 'The No-thingness of Near-Death Experiences (1996: 385–402). Here, we are exposed to mystifying terms such as 'no-thing-ness' and 'glass-ness of story', along with 'the release of experience' and 'the joy of paradox'. He explains:

> *Where there is experience and paradox, then story, image and symbol cannot be far behind. Overflowing with imagery, NDEs present the glass-ness of story, the transparency of symbol, the Light shining through, like the heavenly cities and plants that seem to glow from within. The challenge is to see all the way through the glassness of familiar earthly forms and sense the ineffable glow of no-thing'. (Bailey 1996: 398).*

Although it would be premature to judge Bailey on one citation, the language used in it seems highly pretentious, in my view, and effectively sets up a smoke screen to mask the author's aversion to what the vast majority call the real world – the world of science and technology – which he presents as some man-eating ogre responsible for all that is evil, but in which, like everyone else in the modern world, Bailey immerses himself to the full. He seems to overlook the fact that without science and technology at its best, twenty-first century humanity would not long survive (think Covid and other world-wide epidemics).

Needless to say, Bailey's 'no-thing-ness' is the exact opposite of nothingness: there really is 'something' that is not a thing and is exemplified in the NDE in which beings of light, ineffable love, secret knowledge amounting to omniscience, and so on, are experienced. One really can become the essence of the rose – or so we are told. Bailey seems averse to brain science which may be able to replicate some of the features of the typical NDE and may one day be able to explain the phenomenon.

Anyone can invent an esoteric language in order to make nonsense appear erudite. The so-called 'death of God' theologians (who my former teacher, Anthony Thiselton, once dubbed 'fifty-five year-old men in jeans!) did it in the 1960s (Brown 1969: 219) – and here it seems to me no more effective than in their case. The plain fact, which can be stated in plain language, is that no-one can know what, if anything, happens after death. The very word, however, implies the cessation of consciousness, and in that regard, 'life after death' is a contradiction in terms. Although we may experience the process of dying, we cannot experience being dead. In effect, we suffer death on a nightly basis when we are in a state of dreamless sleep. Thus, it can be established that a death-like state exists. Beyond that, we can only speculate.

There is general agreement that life depends on the dissipation of energy. In his later works Don Cupitt (1994; 2008; 2010) speaks of energy in thermodynamic terms – a river of being that flows through and sustains everything, including consciousness, but whose inevitable destiny is to be exhausted in the heat-death of the universe. The only alternative to this prospect, it seems, is to conceptualise an eternal, self-sustaining being capable of maintaining the universe indefinitely. Physicists can, of course, offer some rationale, if not a complete explanation, for the former view, while transcendentalists are restricted to speculation. It remains possible, of course, that at some time in the future the two ways may intersect, but the solution to how this would occur is far beyond our ken.

In context it is clear that the kind of poetic extravagance we find in some of the contributions to the volume edited by Bailey and Yates is very much in the minority. The collection of essays published in Holden, Greyson and James (2009) is far more scholarly and objective, exemplifying best practice in NDE research, and Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin's (2016) philosophically-orientated volume, which never strays beyond the bounds of modesty, is a welcome antidote to the usual fayre. The esotericism we have encountered in the essays by Benedict and Bailey in my view detracts from the more sober debate regarding what causes the standard NDE experiences which so many life-threatened individuals appear to share.

3. Death without Life

a. The Philosophical Factor

The extravagant talk by Benedict and Eadie in which they claim to have been in existence since the moment of creation, or even prior to the Big Bang, is obviously without foundation, and even the vast majority of NDErs whose experiences have proved hugely encouraging to them would baulk at such outlandish statements. Still, the phalanx of populist works on NDEs by Bruce Greyson, Erlandur Haraldsson, Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring, Michael Sabom, Pim van Lommel and others, are all aimed at demonstrating the view that these experiences provide compelling evidence for an afterlife in which the ego transcends bodily existence. The fact that most of these authors are trained psychologists, psychiatrists or medical practitioners is always emphasised as a means of adding grist to the mill: if people of such learning take the possibility of afterlife so seriously, there must be something in it.

It is, of course, a fallacy that the afterlife becomes more probable once it is recognised that the relevant 'experts' believe it. Whatever the numbers, they can readily be matched by other doctors and psychologists who are committed to a purely materialist approach. Our final section, however, overlooks this debate to pose a more fundamental, first-order question, namely: Would everlasting life be truly desirable? Here, we must be prepared to engage with the philosopher to a greater extent than has been evident hitherto. The question now is not whether an afterlife is to be deemed possible in ontological terms, but whether or not it is to be devoutly wished.

The ground-breaking contribution to this debate was published by the Cambridge philosopher Bernard Williams in a celebrated essay entitled 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality' (1973). The idea for it was drawn from the play by the Czech writer Karel Čapek (1890–1938) which concerns the case of an opera diva Emilia Marty (alias Elina Makropulos) who is supposedly 37 years-old, but turns out to be 337 when it is learned that, back in the late sixteenth century, she was the guinea pig for an elixir invented by her father, a court doctor, which added 300 years to her life with each dose administered. At the point where the action takes place, her time is almost up and she must take a further dose of the potion if she is to carry on living. However, she adamantly refuses to do so, for she has become utterly bored with life and no longer cares about anything. In the following extract she explains her feelings.

> *God, there are no words for it. You find you don't believe in anything. Nothing. Just this emptiness. … Singing's the same as silence. Everything's the same. There's no difference. Nothing changes. Nothing. Nothing matters, nothing happens. How can I put it? Perhaps there's love, but it's only in your minds. Grasp it and it's gone, nowhere, nowhere in the universe. No one can love for three hundred years. Or hope, or write, or sing. You can't keep your eyes open for three hundred years. It's unbearable. Everything grows cold, numb. Numb to good, numb to evil. Numb to heaven, numb to earth. Then you see nothing exists. Nothing. No sin, no pain, not even the earth, nothing … God, the solitude! (Čapek 1999 [1922]: 255–56).*

Is longevity as bad as all that? The other characters in the play do not think so initially, although they have not had Emilia's experience. In her absence they feverishly discuss the uses to which they could put a three-hundred-year life-span – what benefits, or evils, might accrue from it. Anyhow, when she returns to deliver her impassioned speech they think better of it. Should they have done? Scholarly opinion is divided on the issue. It should be noted that, in the present case, the problem is not one of perpetual aging such as befell the unfortunate Sibyl of Cumae in classical mythology, who withered away to almost nothing after Apollo granted her a life of incalculable length but not eternal youth to go with it. Outwardly, Emilia looked every bit the thirty-seven year-old in her 337-year-old body. The key issue was one of mind-numbing boredom. How could anyone want to live indefinitely under such conditions?

Bernard Williams does not doubt that life is intrinsically good and is to be preferred to death for as long as it is deemed worthwhile; but in Emilia Marty's case it *was* no longer worthwhile, at which point finitude seemed to her the better option. So Williams's point is essentially this: life is good and death is an evil because it curtails the projects that make life worthwhile; but there comes a tipping-point beyond which death becomes preferable to a life that has lost all its allure, and life itself becomes an evil if it is extended beyond one's powers, especially if the extension is indefinite. Williams's argument to the effect that immortality would be tedious is based on two premises: first, that any personal desire for immortality presupposes that it should be 'I' who should experience it, and not someone else, even one of John Hick's 'replicas' (Hick 1976: 279–85); and second, that the categorical desires implicit in immortality (as opposed to the contingent desires basic to human survival) should have a connectedness with the personal desires that make the present life worthwhile.

Several scholars, including Timothy Chappell (2009), John Martin Fischer (2009), Mikel Burley (2009) and Samuel Scheffler (2013) responded, somewhat belatedly, to Williams's essay. Not all their comments are germane to our line of enquiry, but one counter-argument that is of some relevance is the proposal presented by Chappell and Fischer to the effect that the idea of an interesting and meaningful life of indefinite length is a philosophically coherent one. Chappell presents his case in terms of seeing a typical human life as a rope composed of hundreds of overlapping fibres of various lengths:

> *Wherever a good life is ended by death, there will always be broken strands, projects of meaning that are left unfulfilled. How much this fateful cutting of the threads will destroy the overall meaningfulness of the life depends on the importance of the threads that get cut. But wherever it occurs it frustrates something important; it is part of*

> *what it is to be living a good human life at any time, that at that time at least some important projects are under way in the life. (Chappell, 2009, online version, 3).*

On this view death is regarded as an unwanted intrusion when it intervenes and cuts off certain projects prior to their fulfilment. Whether this destroys the meaningfulness of the life lived along with the projects already completed is more debatable. Still, Chappell's assessment of what a good human life is goes to the heart of the problem: life is worthwhile for as long as there are worthwhile projects to be undertaken and fulfilled.

Now the question is whether the rope of which Chappell speaks could ever be of indefinite length. Could a life of overlapping projects be infinitely extended? Chappell argues that, in principle, it could, whereas Williams denies this. This denial consists in Williams' understanding of personal identity as involving continuity of character. At the risk of oversimplifying the case, let us suppose that my own character disposes me to an interest in football, beer and computer games. Williams would maintain that in the long-term – and perhaps long before I reached the age of 337 – all these interests would lose their fascination for me and, as a fixed character, I would be incapable of turning my attention to anything else – say, wine, women and song. So I would become as bored as Elina Makropulos.

Chappell challenges Williams on two fronts. First, he supposes that personal identity can be defined in terms of psychological connectedness rather than continuity, in which case it would be easy to drop certain long-held interests and take up others. Given that, in principle, the world has an infinite variety of interests to offer, no character, as defined in Chappell's terms, would ever become bored because he would always be open to new interests drawn from the world's infinite supply.

But suppose Williams' definition of personal identity is correct? Chappell has an answer for that, too. If, like Elina Makropulos, our character was fixed forever, our interest could only be maintained throughout infinity by ensuring a limited supply of infinitely satisfying goods. Could there be any? It is unlikely that football, beer and computer games would feature, but Chappell does suggest a range of higher, or refined goods, including art, friendship, love (not sexual gratification, of course), beauty, the practice of enquiry and discovery, and (in true Platonic tradition) philosophy. He says: 'For each such good, enjoying it is something I can *readily* imagine carrying on with without any necessarily temporal limit emerging from the structure of my experience and enjoyment of that good.'

So who wins the debate – Williams or Chappell? Put as starkly as this it is difficult to say, because there are certain factors which make any clear assessment impossible. In the first place the matter cannot be settled purely on the basis of philosophical argument; in the final analysis it comes down to a matter of preference. This is because there is simply no way of ascertaining whether or not everlasting life would be insufferably boring unless it could be experienced, and even then there could be no definitive answer because, in the nature of the case, no-one could ever reach the end of such a life in order to be able to form a considered judgement. Then, too, we would need to bear in mind the psychological disposition of the individual; some might well revel in immortality, while others, like Jonathan Glover (1977: 57), who 'would be glad of the chance to sample a few million years and see how it went'[11], might find it insufferably tedious. The prospect of these individual dispositions can already be found in microcosm in the world as we experience it: some

individuals look forward to retirement and find it absorbing and fulfilling ('How did we ever find time for work?'), while others regard it almost as a death sentence, considering their usefulness in life to be at an end, and finding no hope or purpose thereafter.

A different kind of problem is raised by Mikel Burley (2009, online) who argues that the Williams-Chappell debate is much too premature because its terms have not been sufficiently defined and so, as he puts it, is 'hopelessly underdescribed'. He continues:

> *The problem for anyone who wishes to advocate necessary immortality [by which he means immortality in which the subject has no choice in the matter] … consists in making intelligible the claim that such a life could be recognizably human or near enough to human that it would be anything in which we could have a personal interest… Consider, for a start, whether a necessarily immortal being could be composed of flesh and blood, and bone and gristle; that is, the sort of stuff that we are made of. Or are these forms of matter inherently corruptible? And if such a being could not be composed of these organic materials, what else could it be made of which would entitle us to say that the being is human, or is like a human in the relevant respects?... Among myriad further questions that arise are ones to do with where a necessary immortal is supposed to live out its infinite number of days. Supposing it begins its life on earth, where, then, is it going to go when the sun becomes a red giant and engulfs this planet, as it is due to do in about 7.6 billion years' time according to recent estimates? Are we to imagine the immortal's being somehow transported to some other inhabitable planet, or are we instead to set aside the facts about the universe as we know them and presume that the earth can remain inhabitable forever? (Burley, online, 6–7).*

Burley argues that none of these practical questions can be answered until the underlying terms of reference – notably, the meaning of immortality – have been agreed and understood. Yet unlike Burley, who seems to hold out some hope of this, I would venture so far as to suggest that a decision between the conflicting positions of Williams and Chappell can never be made, even in principle. It will never be possible to tell whether immortality in human terms, whether lived here or elsewhere, would be infinitely boring or infinitely satisfying. In the first place we are dealing with a mere thought experiment which could never pan out in practice. But, secondly, even if it could, by definition no-one would ever reach the end of an endless life in order to be able to assess whether such a life was boring or not. It could be argued that if a person became bored along the way, the balance might be tipped in favour of Williams' view; but this would not prove that life could not regain its interest in later centuries or millennia, and that the period of boredom was not a temporary blip. After all, this is just the kind of thing we find occurring in real life. So, in the final analysis, the question could never be settled.

A final factor to be observed is that the Williams-Chappell debate is conducted on the assumption that immortality is to be envisaged in this-worldly terms, and would consist of the kind of experiences with which we are already familiar in our mortal lives. As Chappell himself admits, neither he nor Williams (nor Čapek) resort to God at any stage of their respective arguments. If all we had to look forward to was an endless extension of our present existence, with all its defects and

limitations, Williams would no doubt win the day; immortality *would* become unbearable, even if it could be lived in a perpetual prime of life. Indeed, even a good life, full of pleasure and interest, might be seen as undesirable if it stretched to infinity. The prospect of necessary immortality, as Burley calls it, could be as appalling as that of necessary oblivion. Perhaps, in the end, it is the concept of any kind of everlastingness that daunts us, regardless of whether it must be passed in oblivion or lived through.

b. The Religious Factor

This brings us to the nub of the problem: Is contemplation of the form an immortal life might take merely a thought experiment, or is it a real possibility? Here we approach the interface between the human and the divine. Regardless of whether or not they hold any religious convictions, many NDErs emerge from their experience convinced that a heavenly world exists. True, they do not generally trouble to subject it to philosophical scrutiny, but simply accept it on experiential grounds. Given our current scientific understanding of the universe, the intuition of Mellen Thomas Benedict that consciousness is somehow woven into its fabric seems to be entirely without foundation. The theist, however, asserts that there is no limit to the states of affairs that an omnipotent God could bring about. This raises a whole raft of questions, including how it would be possible for a non-material being to act in a material world, and why such a being should feel disposed to do so. The only question relevant to the present enquiry, however, is whether a state of everlasting existence in God's presence would be sufficient to eliminate the problems of immortality outlined by Williams and others. The typical theist tends to believe that, although God will dispose of all who are opposed to him or who are irredeemably wicked, those he admits into his presence will be rewarded with an everlasting life of bliss. It is supposed that, as an omnipotent being, he is *able* to create such a state, and that, as an omnibenevolent being, he must *desire* to do so.

The chief problem for NDErs and traditional religious believers alike concerns the precise *nature* of immortality. The terms 'immortality' and 'eternal life' are often confused, as if they are interchangeable – but they are not. The first term implies a time-bound universe in which life is lived in linearity, from one moment to the next. The claim of immortalists is that we live through time as we do now, but that time is infinite. Eternal life, however, is not life lived through time but life lived depthlessly. As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) put it: 'If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits'. (1974 [1921]: 6.4311). Not only is there no guarantee of the ego's immortality, says Wittgenstein, but such a condition would be irrelevant to solving the problems of life: 'Or is some riddle solved by my surviving forever?' (1974 [1921]: 6. 4312). Yet for him, eternal life is not an alternative solution to the riddle of life, but part of the question.

A very different thinker from an earlier age, Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), would no doubt have recognized (in its Latin form) the term eternal life, but not Wittgenstein's interpretation of it. For him God alone is the author of eternal life, and for his creatures it denotes timeless existence; there is no sense of being in time with its suggestion of linear progression. For the sake of argument, however, let us suppose that God can ensure our immortality through time, and that all heavenly citizens are conscious of this temporality. Surely, the question of the provision of sufficiently engaging projects would arise in the heavenly sphere as much as in the earthly one. The kind of projects that people find conducive in earthly life (wine, women and song, sporting activities, climbing the greasy pole to success, and so forth) would hardly be appropriate in the

heavenly one; but it is difficult to imagine what kind of interests would serve. Playing the harp would be an end in itself and would soon lose its allure, as would accompanying the heavenly choir of angels. John Hick's (1976: 407–14) suggestion that, as we can never fulfil our potential in the present life we shall continue to do so in the next, might hold out a little more promise, but in that case we would need to adopt the view that the afterlife cannot be a state of perfection, since it will be full of individuals striving to achieve it. And it would be difficult to appreciate that a world of still imperfect individuals – even a heavenly one – would not be marred by most of the moral and social defects experienced in this earthly life. Moreover, if the heavenly sphere were continually being added to by the arrival of new defective individuals, it would seem that this state of heavenly imperfection would persist indefinitely; and the prospect of a heavenly existence tainted with imperfection is surely counterintuitive.

Now, if there are no meaningful projects in which to be engaged, and yet heavenly immortality is time-bound, then existence will surely be as tedious as in the case of earthly immortality – if not more so. For on earth, at least, we have some idea of the kind of projects that would make an everlasting life meaningful and, as Chappell has pointed out, the idea of there being infinite goods of a higher order is not an incoherent one. But the mind blanks at the prospect of doing anything in heaven. The usual glib answer given by the believer is that we will all be engaged in adoring the Creator forever; but here again, the prospect has not been thought through, and is completely alien to our human experience. In its limited earthly sense adoration of God involves prayer, music and, sometimes, body movement. Most believers simply take this earthly understanding and project it onto the heavenly plane; heavenly adoration is simply earthly adoration magnified. But what proportion of the world's population – even of Christians – would genuinely regard this as a life of eternal bliss?

It might be argued that all these worries about worthwhile projects, or lack of them, could be negated simply by arguing that an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God will ensure that all will enjoy a state of eternal bliss – that this state will be intrinsic to heavenly existence, and nothing will be needed to achieve it. However, it seems that in this case the philosophical difficulties are being ignored, and that God is simply being wheeled in as a *deus ex machina* to 'solve' the problems. But one does not achieve philosophically satisfying results simply by turning a blind eye to the difficulties that exist.

The other major alternative is to remove the temporal factor from the equation by insisting that God is timeless, that he creates timelessly, and that his creatures enjoy timeless existence in the resurrection world. For now, we live bodily in a time-bound material world, but in the afterlife our mode of living will be transformed, and time will no longer be a factor in our existence. This is the basis of belief in the so-called doctrine of the beatific vision traditionally held by the Roman Catholic Church. Put simply, the beatific vision suggests that after death the believer will see God as he is, and not simply indirectly, or as a 'poor reflection' as is the case in the present life. Various well-known scriptures such as 1 Cor. 13:12 and 1 John 3:2 are adduced as a justification for this view.

Aquinas regarded the beatific vision as man's 'final end', resulting in his ultimate or perfect happiness. He argued that any happiness attained in this life could only be partial, because it consisted in our desire to know things, and that desire can never be exhausted here because our knowledge can never be complete. It is only when we reach the very essence of

God, in whom all knowledge resides, that our own quest for knowledge can be completely satisfied, and we can be wholly happy. But Aquinas is quick to add that seeing the essence of God does not imply that any of his creatures can understand him fully, even in the beatified state, because that would be to comprehend his omnipotence which, by definition, could not then truly be omnipotence (Burley 2009, online version, 6–7).

Again, it seems that the beatific vision is timeless, and that 'those who see the essence of God see all they see in it at the same time' (*ST*, 1a.12.10). In earthly terms our knowledge grows through time because we can only come to know things through successive ideas; but since God has but one essence, all that we can know of him must be subsumed under one idea, and so known simultaneously. In order to see God as he is, therefore, we must see him in his timeless being, and we could not do this as mere time-bound observers, otherwise we could have no more understanding of what it means to exist timelessly than we do now.

It would take us too far afield to discuss in detail what it could possibly mean to exist and act timelessly. Suffice it to be said that, according to human understanding, to act means, inevitably, to act through time. How a timeless God could create is an enigma we cannot stop to consider here, but it is worth pausing to ask what a timeless post-mortem existence would mean for us. Presumably, if Aquinas is right, our ultimate happiness would consist in doing nothing (since there would be no time to do anything in) but gazing on the face of God eternally – not, of course, in time, but in a timeless 'present'. Such ideas, however, are so alien to our thinking that we cannot even begin to comprehend them, let alone assess whether or not such a state would ensure our ultimate happiness. The nearest we can perhaps get in imagination is in thinking of the most sublime moment of our life, and stretching it on the canvas of eternity, but even then we can probably do it only in temporal terms.

In attempting to apply discussion of our problem to the religious sphere, particularly in the Christian sense, we seem to encounter a dilemma. If we envisage immortality with God in much the way that we might envisage an infinite extension of life on earth, namely as an eternity of overlapping interests and desires experienced by the ego, it appears that there is no compelling philosophical reason for thinking that everlasting life in heaven would be any less tedious than life on earth. On the other hand, in arguing that such a life would be infinitely worthwhile, we would probably have to concede that the heavenly state would need to be so radically different from our present experience of what makes life worthwhile that we could not even begin to imagine what it would be like. Perhaps it would defy all attempts at analogy, particularly if such an existence were to be conceived as timeless rather than everlasting. In any event, it would surely raise serious issues for personal continuity, for the interests and projects which make the present life worthwhile are inextricably bound with a psycho-physical understanding of personhood which might not apply in a resurrection world.

Traditional Christian conceptions of immortality may, indeed, lead to a contradiction (although the believer might prefer the term 'paradox'). The great majority of believers assume that their egos will survive death, and that the delights of the resurrection world will be enjoyed by themselves as the individuals they were on earth. Regardless of whether this is envisaged in terms of bodily transformation or disembodied survival, personal continuity is assumed; there would be little point in hoping for an everlasting life that would be lived by someone else – perhaps by someone with a psychological connectedness to but not personal continuity with the deceased, as in the manner of a 'Parfitian survivor' (Parfit 1984),

perhaps. Yet although the Jesus of the Gospels does not directly contradict the traditional Christian expectation, the emphasis of his eschatological teaching lies elsewhere, and certainly not on the significance of the self. Indeed: 'If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life (*psyche*) will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and the gospel will save it.' (Matt. 10: 38–39; cp. Luke 9: 23–24; 17: 33; John 12: 25). Jesus, it seems, wants the disciple to pour out his life (or 'self') for him in imitation of the way in which he will pour out his own life on the cross for others. In order to take hold of life eternal, it is necessary to let go of the self and enter into the life of God. Eternal life, in fact, has nothing to do with infinite selfhood, but everything to do with fullness of life in the present, which means living *sub specie aeternitatis*. And, according to the Johannine Jesus: '… this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.' (John 17: 3). And again, 'I tell you the truth, whoever hears my words and believes in him who sent me has eternal life.'(John 5: 24)

We need to be clear, therefore, that eternal life (*zōē aiōnios*), according to the Jesus of the Gospels, is not identical with the popular conception of everlasting life, but involves submission to God in the present. Classical theology in the Augustinian – Thomist tradition generally translates this image in terms of heavenly existence whose abiding feature is eternal, timeless contemplation of God. According to Aquinas: 'Final and perfect happiness (*beatitudo*) can consist in nothing else than the vision of the divine essence. [P] eople are not perfectly happy so long as something remains for them to desire and seek… [and] for perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very essence of the first cause.' (*ST*, 1a2ae. 3.3, cp. *ST*, 1a2ae. 3.8).

But what does the beatific vision entail? Aquinas thinks that only complete union of the human mind and will with those of God will suffice. Of course, this is impossible by human effort; it is God, through his love for us, who draws us to himself. Thus it is that in the beatific vision the individual is lost in the light of God's glory and becomes like him. In this regard, 1 John 3: 2 becomes almost a *leitmotiv* for Aquinas (cf. *ST*, 1a. 12. 1–2; 1a2ae, 3.8). The human mind is completely in tune with the mind of God. Moreover, the knowledge of God's essence which is gained thereby means that the believer's ultimate goal has been achieved, and there is nothing more to be desired.

But how does all this square with our philosophical discussion on the desirability of immortality? In the first place, it should be noted that when Aquinas declares that we can know God's essence, he does not mean that we can know everything about *him.* How much God can be perceived depends upon the quality of the intellect doing the perceiving; but no-one can know God fully, if only because he is infinite, and no finite mind can grasp infinity (*ST*, 1a. 12.7). But does not this imply a shortfall in human knowledge of God, and hence the frustration of human desire to know fully? If so, it is surely questionable whether even the beatific vision can result in man's *perfect* happiness, as Aquinas claims, for in fact there is still something to be known about God that no human being can ever know, in which case there would appear to be a contradiction.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to focus on some off-beat responses to the claim made by many that the NDE may be

regarded as evidence for some kind of conscious existence beyond finite earthly life. Even if we overlook some of the more extreme accounts, such as those of Benedict and Eadie to the effect that our egos are so woven into an infinite stream of consciousness that death effectively becomes a delusion, the popular view that NDEs provide evidence for the indefinite continuity of the individual ego disregards a number of objections, not least the fact that the physical brain has long been known to play an indispensable role in consciousness and that without it physical life would be impossible. However, I have chosen to focus on some of the less discussed problems – epistemic, linguistic, and philosophical.

Epistemically, it seems that, although the individual NDE experience can hardly be doubted and is generally reported as accurately as possible by the percipient, despite the frequent lapse of years between the experience and its narration, the naïve realism that often underlies the report amounts to interpretation. For instance, whereas a particularly striking figure may be evident to the percipient's experience, the assertion that this is to be identified with a particular divine figure cannot be established epistemically. The very fact that NDErs from different cultures identify such figures differently testifies to the likelihood that interpretative elements are at work.

Linguistically, words can be used as building blocks to enable us to construct the world of our desires, as Benedict and Eadie, among others, appear to do. These, however, are primarily worlds of the imagination; they do not correspond with the kind of universe revealed to us by the natural sciences. The raw NDE experience described by those above were no doubt personally transformative, but they do not miraculously transform the physical nature of the universe, as currently understood, into something wholly other, despite the fundamental importance attached to language by most philosophers.

Finally, there is the philosophical issue of whether the immortality for which some NDEs are supposed to provide evidence would be desirable. I provided examples of how life everlasting in the earthly sense, and possibly the heavenly one too, could be as much of a curse as a blessing, and of course, there remains the question of whether such a state would be conceptually possible.

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